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## SUCCESS STORY

### Peace Rallies Diffuse Tensions in Eastern Terai



More than 30,000 people attended rallies promoting harmony in Nepal's Terai region.



Popular Nepali comedian duo MaHa entertains at a rally in Inaruwa, Sunsari.

*In August 2006, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) began a 2-year, \$15,000,000 program in Nepal to bolster the current peace process, strengthen governance mechanisms, and support positive, nonviolent community engagement in the country's political, social, and economic future. The objectives of the program are to:*

1. *Increase access to information and diversify public debate on issues critical to political transition, and*
2. *Increase the effectiveness of key political transition institutions.*

**January 2008** – In the months leading up to the scheduled November 22, 2007, elections, communal violence spiked throughout Nepal's eastern Terai region, as protesting groups openly harassed the Pahadi (people with ancestral ties to Nepal's hill areas) living in the southern plains along the border with India. Many of the agitators targeted this group as a way of lashing out at the Pahadi-dominated government, which is seen as being unable or unwilling to address the grievances of the Madhesi, the indigenous people of the southern plains. The elections were postponed as violence threatened to spread throughout the region, push the country into a state of unrest, and derail the ongoing peace process.

In an effort to inspire peace, USAID/OTI, from its field office in the Terai town of Itahari, provided funding for a well-known Nepali human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) to hold a series of rallies promoting communal harmony. The NGO focused on Siraha, Saptari, Sunsari, and Morang, districts where tensions were running high. Before each rally, organizers marched through the streets, chanting peace slogans and encouraging residents to drop what they were doing and attend. At the rallies, residents were encouraged to use peaceful methods to resolve issues and diffuse tensions in their communities. Human rights activists from national and regional organizations urged attendees to respect the differing ethnic backgrounds of their neighbors, and popular Nepali comedians and actors entertained the crowds and reinforced the messages.

The response to the rallies was overwhelmingly positive. Despite crippling transportation strikes and road closures caused by agitating groups, the four rallies drew more than 30,000 attendees – from both Pahadi and Madhesi backgrounds. The rallies were widely reported in regional and national newspapers. They also received coverage on national television. USAID/OTI sees such media attention as a key component in the effort to engage communities in inter-ethnic dialogues about security and stability.